

## 14: *Involvement and Enjoyment:*

### MUSIC AS EXPRESSIVE LANGUAGE: WHEN WORDS CAN'T DO JUSTICE

DONN LeVIE JR.

TALKING ABOUT MUSIC IS LIKE dancing about architecture, as the anonymous saying goes. It's often difficult to find and express appropriate symbolic communication (such as body movement or even words), which often has personal, relative meaning to objectively represent some aspect of our world that we all share. How does choreographed body movement relate to architecture, or spoken or written language to the pure objectivity of music? Language and symbols, as poetic and beautiful as they can be, can take us only so far in communicating some aspect of our world that is both personal but yet shared by us all.

We tend to alter the very things at which we marvel when we represent them with second- or third-order symbols, such as words, pictures, or notation. Those symbols, which often are personal and familiar to us, are shaped by our upbringing, environment, experience, cognitive abilities, and many other variables. These are the reasons why some people prefer the music of Bach and others like The Beatles; some gravitate toward Gothic architecture and others, Romanesque; or some prefer Coke and others, Pepsi.

We appreciate beauty in visual art and the art of music as it conceptually represents an event, person, idea, emotion, or place in the real world. The Barrios musical masterpiece, "Una Limosna por el Amor de Dios" ("Alms for the Love of God") or Caravaggio's "Doubting Thomas," which the artist painted in 1602, represent the artists' interpretation of some momentary event in life.

Nearly everyone viewing the “Doubting Thomas,” which shows an incredulous Disciple Thomas touching the spear wound in the side of Jesus as others look on, comes away with practically identical impressions. However, listening to “Una Limosna por el Amor de Dios” will evoke different feelings, emotions, thoughts, and memories for each of us because of the words we use to describe them. Therefore, we can argue that music often can transcend the original intent of the composer or interpretation of the artist.

Over the centuries, people have learned the ways music and the arts represent interpreted reflections of life and that they could participate in shaping those reflections through acquiring musical expertise and performance experience. Except perhaps for poetry, the written word implicitly imprisons the writer while the spoken word handicaps the orator because of built-in conceptual and contextual boundaries (all language is a second-order representation of something) that sometimes are difficult if not impossible to cross. But the artist and musician provide a glimpse of the nature of reality, the splendors of heaven, or the torments of hell (and sometimes all three at once) because they are not as restrained by such conceptual bondage.

For example, Samuel Barber’s “Adagio for Strings” is one of the most beautiful and at the same time sorrowful pieces of music ever written. “Adagio” is the second movement from Barber’s *String Quartet, Op. 11*, written in 1936. This strikingly beautiful composition, written in “arch” form, moves forward in a step-wise melodic fashion that weaves inversions and variations to create an unforgettable aural experience. It is often the music of choice at funerals for heads of state and dignitaries because of its heavy emotion and somber feeling of loss, which no doubt is why it was selected as part of the soundtrack for the movie, *Platoon*.

We know that music can help restore a sense of self-identity and relatedness in therapeutic approaches that reconnect patients to their personhood to a place beyond their illness. The transcendent nature of music elevates patients into higher realms and can facilitate intuitive realizations of their sense of belonging to something greater than themselves. The Most Reverend Michael Mayne, Dean Emeritus of

Westminster, writes that music has the capacity to expose us to a kind of beauty and hopefulness about the human race that cannot be expressed in any other terms. When disaster befalls individuals—or communities—music can therefore serve as a catalyst by which people can renew their own sense of identity and worth, and help restore their connectedness with others and perhaps a power beyond themselves.

In a previous book, *It's All About HYMN*, I wrote about a friend who was visiting his hometown in the midwest of the United States shortly after much of the town was devastated by a series of tornadoes. He recalled one scene in which congregation members of a church that was destroyed had gathered among the rubble to comfort each other and salvage what they could from the debris. Young and old alike, they broke out into spontaneous, joyous unaccompanied song with the old hymn, “’Tis So Sweet to Trust in Jesus.” These people embraced the hymn because it served as a connection to each other through that sense of community. While many of those individuals may have lost homes or loved ones in the storm, their connectedness as a “community” remained intact, which helped maintain—perhaps even strengthen—each individual’s unique contribution to it.

#### WHEN MUSIC TRANSCENDS THE LIMITATION OF LANGUAGE

In 2006, I was commissioned by a church supporting a Christian disaster relief group affiliated with the Samaritan’s Purse organization to provide original music for a five-minute video presentation. The production was to show how this organization was helping people rebuild homes and lives along the Mississippi Gulf Coast that was devastated by Hurricane Katrina. The video production was running behind schedule, and I had to create the music based on a verbal description of the imagery that was to be shown to audiences. The first portion of the video was to depict scenes of destruction in the area and the emotional despair on the faces of people who lost everything. The second half of the video was to show people from the relief group building homes and caring for their physical, emotional, and spiritual well-being. There would be no vocal narrative for the project.

The challenge for me was to convey in a musical expression what words would simply fail to capture, even though I had no direct visual imagery to

work from for this project (though the cable news stations filled that void with non-stop coverage of the disaster). I ended up with two original pieces to accompany the video presentation: one for the first half of the video, and another for the second half. The titles for the pieces sprang forth on their own with virtually no conscious forethought. I was hoping to avoid something I've seen all too often: titles for such projects appearing contrived or artificial, thereby dulling the luster of the final product.

How would I communicate through the guitar the fear, loss, and uncertainty these people experienced, and ultimately the sense of being genuinely loved and cared for by strangers? The imagery that came to mind immediately was the passage in Matthew 8:23-27, when a great storm came upon Jesus and the Disciples who were in the middle of the Dead Sea in a small wooden ship. The Disciples were afraid for their lives, but Jesus was asleep in the ship during the maelstrom. When they awakened him, he rebuked the winds and the sea; and there was a great calm.

After some experimentation for the bridge section, which transitions from a major to a minor key, I incorporated a few subtle dissonant chords and used an arpeggiated diminished-seventh chord up the neck of the guitar in a crescendo fashion to express the imagery of fear and uncertainty. To resolve the emotional tension, I return the listener to the major key after a second pass through the bridge section, to suggest a sense of reassurance and hope after the storm has passed. The title for this first piece just had to be "Let Not Your Heart be Troubled."

The second piece expresses the kind-hearted nature and concern for others displayed by the folks in this relief organization and all Good Samaritans, and is aptly entitled, "Song for the Samaritans." The major key provides a calming yet subtle uplifting mood, which parallels the visual imagery in the video.

I had just one opportunity to view the finished video only minutes before its premier for the relief group and their church congregation sponsors, and to pace my two original compositions with the video, which were to be performed live. Fortune favors the brave, and maybe a little divine providence helped, but the video finished *exactly* as the tones from the last chord echoed in the auditorium at four minutes and fifty seconds.

## FUNERAL FOR A FRIEND

Several years ago, my very good friend and co-worker Bill was killed in a horrible motorcycle accident. His death came particularly hard for those of us who worked with him and knew him for so many years. Bill was the quintessential Harley-Davidson rider: Six-feet-two-inches tall, 300 lbs, long greying hair in a ponytail, and sporting a Billy Gibbons ZZ Top-style beard. His physical appearance intimidated people who didn't know him, but his was a gentle, kind, and compassionate spirit rarely encountered these days. Bill enjoyed listening to me play and practice during lunch hours in the glass-and-stone lobby of the building where we worked. Bill thought the acoustics were amazing there, providing a sense of life to the music.

Bill's wife asked me if I would play just one piece at his memorial service. She told me my arrangement of the old hymn, "Praise God From Whom All Blessings Flow" was one of Bill's favorite, so on a Saturday afternoon in a standing-room-only crowd in a large Masonic Lodge in Dripping Springs, Texas, I performed my rendition of the piece, which for such an occasion, can evoke an emotional response. And that it did.

But Bill wouldn't have wanted everyone in such a state. He was one of the smartest, funniest people I had ever met, and I knew I had to do something musically to lighten the mood. Many had already related funny stories about Bill, and that helped us all forge our way through the grief by thinking *Bill would have loved that!* So, it was my turn.

Bill was from Alabama and everyone who knew him was aware of his expert knowledge of the history of the south, particularly the Civil War, which he called the "war of Yankee aggression." When I had finished the last bar of "Praise God From Whom All Blessings Flow," I immediately transitioned into an arrangement of "Dixie." The mood of the room changed instantly because everyone understood the musical message that piece related about Bill. People were laughing through their tears and grief because of that powerful musical association—when words couldn't do justice—that served as a soothing, healing balm for their wounded spirits. While I may have involved people in the music, it was the music that in turn reminded them of their involvement in Bill's life, and how much enjoyment he brought to friend and stranger alike.

Bill would have loved that. §§



## Staying Calm in the Midst of Performance

CHRISTOPHER PARKENING

PERFORMANCE ANXIETY (STAGE FRIGHT) IS A POTENTIAL PROBLEM that can be disastrous to any performance. Andrés Segovia acknowledged that a guitarist could lose up to fifty percent of his technique due to stress. He even remarked, “When I go to a concert I am always nervous; then when I have to begin a concert I am ready to cancel it; but when I have finished a concert, I would like to begin again.” Stage fright can be overcome, though, and you can learn to use the excitement produced by the expectation of a concert to your advantage. Everyone has a different approach to conquering performance anxiety.

American film composer John Williams once related to me this story about the great cellist Gregor Piatagorsky. In a conversation about the dilemma of stage fright, a friend of Piatagorsky suggested that backstage before the concert the cellist should just tell himself “I am the great Gregor Piatagorsky” and he would not have any problem with nerves. Piatagorsky replied, “That is what I already do. The problem is...I do not believe it myself!”

This humorous anecdote shows to what extreme we sometimes go in dealing with this problem. One key to overcoming stage fright is preparation. Long-term preparation would start taking place when you first schedule a performance (or even before). Short-term preparation would be effective the day of the performance. By using the following ideas, you should gain insight to help you deliver your best performance that is not hampered by nerves, but rather charged by enthusiasm.

### LONG-TERM PREPARATION

Practice effectively. This means working out the details of the music and your performance in advance. There is no substitute for being adequately prepared.

Choose a program within your capability. Start with a secure piece that will allow you to feel comfortable on stage. Plan stage entrances, bows, and announcements as much as possible prior to the performance.

Simulate performance conditions. If possible, do a practice concert. Take advantage of every performance opportunity to refine your performing skills. Learn to play cold without warming up. You might also try tape-recording yourself.

Note several sections of each piece of music from which you could start should a memory lapse occur in concert. If one does occur, jump to one of these sections and keep going. Do not dwell on the memory lapse, but think about expressing the music.

### SHORT-TERM PREPARATION

Arrive at the performance venue early to get comfortable with the stage, lighting, chair, and sound of the hall.

Warm up, but do not overdo. In general, play a little slower with perhaps less volume, saving energy for the concert. Do not give your best performance in the dressing room.

Do not be analytical about the music backstage. At this point you should think in more general terms.

### DURING PERFORMANCE

Consciously relax as practiced and concentrate on playing the music beautifully.

If you make a mistake, keep going and continue to try to do your best. Do not let your feelings dictate your attitude, but focus on the music.

Sometimes you must take musical and technical chances in performance to play something extraordinarily beautiful or exciting. I have seen Segovia “play on the edge”—taking the chance of sacrificing slight technical accuracies for the most exhilarating performance. As wonderful as

flawless technique may be, it is genuine musicality that will truly move an audience.

I have a commitment to personal excellence which at its heart seeks to honor and glorify the Lord with my life and the music that I play. People often ask how my faith affects my music and my career as a concert guitarist. As a Christian, I find it helpful to contemplate verses from the Bible before and even during a performance. One of my favorites is Philippians 4:6-7: “Be anxious for nothing; but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known unto God. And the peace of God, which passeth all understanding, shall keep your hearts and minds through Jesus Christ.” It is interesting to note that it does not say God will answer every request in the way you would expect. It does say that by trusting in Him with thanksgiving, you will have the peace to handle whatever circumstance or situation that occurs. In other words, you place the burden of responsibility upon the Lord, trusting that His will would be done. That is what gives you the peace. Here are some other helpful verses:

Romans 8:28: “And we know that all things work together for good to them that love God, to them who are called according to his purpose.”

Philippians 4:8-9: “Finally, brethren, whatsoever things are true, whatsoever things are honest, whatsoever things are just, whatsoever things are pure, whatsoever things are lovely, whatsoever things are of good report; if there be any virtue, and if there be any praise, think on these things. Those things, which ye have both learned, and received, and heard, and seen in me, do: and the God of peace shall be with you.”

II Corinthians 12:9: “And he said unto me, My grace is sufficient for thee: for my strength is made perfect in weakness. Most gladly therefore will I rather glory in my infirmities, that the power of Christ may rest upon me.”

Isaiah 26:3: “Thou wilt keep him in perfect peace, whose mind is stayed on thee: because he trusteth in thee.”

Proverbs 3:5-6: “Trust in the LORD with all thine heart; and lean not into thine own understanding. In all thy ways acknowledge him, and he shall direct thy paths.”

1 Peter 5:5B-7: “...be clothed with humility: for God resisteth the proud, and giveth grace to the humble. Humble yourselves therefore under

the mighty hand of God, that he may exalt you in due time: casting all your care upon him; for he careth for you.”

Isaiah 12:2: “Behold, God is my salvation: I will trust, and not be afraid.”

John 3:16: “For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life.”

Most people believe you need to be confident in order to play a good concert. I understand, however, that God does not want us to take confidence in our own ability, and I realize that I am inadequate for the task ahead. This requires me to depend totally on God’s power and grace to sustain me. Likewise then, it is a source of peace and comfort to look back and remember God’s grace in past performances and trust that His grace will be sufficient for this one as well. Backstage, I constantly remind myself of what I know to be true. For example, “*All things work together for good...*”

Personally, I ultimately desire to please the Lord with my music. I dedicate every performance to my Lord and Savior Jesus Christ and consequently, the “approval” of the audience is secondary. For more insight into this topic, I recommend reading *Anxiety Attacked* by John MacArthur Jr. (Victor Books).

Many people have asked me how to become an excellent guitarist. I answer, “Be a hard-working perfectionist,” which personally makes up for my lack of talent in a lot of areas. Our goal should be to overcome what we lack in talent or ability by what we have in dedication and commitment. This takes self-discipline—the ability to regulate your conduct by principles and sound judgment, rather than by impulse, desire, high pressure, or social custom. It is the ability to subordinate the body to what is right and what is best. Self-discipline means nothing more than to order the priorities of your life. It is the bridge between thought and accomplishment, the glue that binds inspiration to achievement.

For me, as a Christian, self-discipline is, first of all, to obey the word of God—the Bible. It is to bring my desires, my emotions, my feelings, and all that is in my life under the control of God supremely, so that I may live an obedient life which has as its goal the praise of the Lord. As the great

composer, J. S. Bach wrote, “The aim and final reason of all music should be none else but the glory of God.” §§

Christopher Parkening is celebrated as one of the world’s preeminent virtuosos of the classical guitar. *The Washington Post* called him “the leading guitar virtuoso of our day, combining profound musical insight with complete technical mastery of his instrument.” *The New York Times* described his playing as “so intelligent, sensitive and adept that one can forget everything but the music.” *The Los Angeles Times* stated that “Parkening is considered America’s reigning classical guitarist, carrying the torch of his mentor, the late Andrés Segovia.” The great Spanish guitarist Segovia himself proclaimed, “Christopher Parkening is a great artist—he is one of the most brilliant guitarists in the world.”

Parkening’s performances, recordings, and collaborations, which have included artists such as Josh Groban, Kathleen Battle, Renée Fleming, Plácido Domingo, Jubilant Sykes, and composers/conductors Elmer Bernstein and John Williams, have received the highest worldwide acclaim. A frequent soloist with leading orchestras, Parkening has performed at the White House and appeared on *20/20*, *The Today Show*, *The Tonight Show*, *Good Morning America*, and *The Grammy Awards*.

Parkening has recorded extensively for Angel/EMI Classic, and twice has received *Grammy* nominations. His autobiography, *Grace Like a River* (Tyndale House) received wide acclaim. Currently, Parkening is Distinguished Professor of Music and Chair of the Guitar Department at Pepperdine University in Malibu, California.

Visit Christopher Parkening’s website at [www.parkening.com](http://www.parkening.com).

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## *Involvement and Enjoyment*

KEVIN GALLAGHER

OFTEN IN MY TEACHING I find myself trying to convince students to enjoy what they are doing if they want to get the best results. To me, enjoyment means playing and experimenting—like a child does when he sits down with a box or some other basic object.

As adults, we are very conditioned by society to produce results and so, we forget about enjoyment. The irony is—without play and enjoyment, rarely do we get the desired results. It seems that most guitarists are in a rush to arrive at some point in the future where all technical limitations cease to exist and they can finally sit back and enjoy playing. In the meantime, they overly concern themselves with not making mistakes in their playing. They don't realize that if they could develop the habit of enjoying where they are now, they would learn much more and play better.

Perhaps the problem is that we take things too seriously. Conservatories have made classical music into a very serious affair and in some ways have sucked the joy out of playing. We don't want to just enjoy playing anymore—now we need to be respected, to impress our teachers and peers, to play stylistically correct, to play well for the competition or jury, to get a university position, and so on. We begin to lose our enthusiasm for playing because it always feels like a test. Many teachers don't emphasize enjoyment at all. The emphasis is on hard work, not pleasure. Some teachers listen only for what the student is doing wrong. This kind of focus then gets learned by the student. Imagine a student of English who is only told how he speaks incorrectly—how confident and secure do you think that student would feel about speaking?

Sometimes a student will say to me: “I can’t really enjoy my playing unless I feel like I can play well already.” This sounds totally logical, but as I have witnessed, even some of the most technically gifted students can end up not really enjoying their playing. The playing may be technically accurate, but stiff and sterile. There’s a sense of labor in the playing, a feeling of defensiveness. On the other hand, I’ve heard players who possess far less technique but enjoy their playing more. Although it may not be technically accurate at times, it is alive and spontaneous. There’s a sense of play or a feeling of openness.

So how do we begin to enjoy playing? There are many ways. To me, the first step is to enjoy how the composition is written. Since we are interpreters, appreciating the composition has a major effect on how we play it. This also gets your mind away from worrying about making mistakes. Most of the time, guitarists play the notes of the score and don’t really notice how the work is constructed. As we become more aware of the manner in which a composition is written, we enjoy hearing how it unfolds as we play it. The listening experience becomes more profound as does the playing. We don’t have to analyze every single aspect of the piece, but it’s important to be curious about how it’s written; to notice how the notes move, how the chords sound, what each interval sounds like, what the rhythm feels like, how high or low the notes go, for example. Listening with wonder and attention keeps the mind focused on beauty.

It’s also fun to experiment with new ways of playing. Let yourself try new ideas and stop repeating the same old ideas *ad nauseam* as this causes boredom. Always try new ideas in phrasing, articulation, fingering, mood, colors, tempo, groove, and so on. Don’t worry if the ideas don’t always work. The point is to play and experiment. Allow yourself to make mistakes if they come—just keep looking for new ways of playing. This is how we improvise in classical music, and this is how we learn best. Let yourself NOT know what’s going to happen all the time; don’t always have everything completely worked out. Enjoy the ride and see what happens. Be as much an auditor as you are a performer.

Enjoying the movement of the hands is also usually overlooked by students. To use shifting as an example, most students see shifting as a sort

of necessary labor. They don't really enjoy the glide of the hand because they are so concerned with missing the shift. If we watch a great player, we can see that shifting is something that is enjoyed. There is pleasure in feeling the movement of the arm. The hand motion becomes a mini ballet; an art form in itself. This kind of enjoyment can be applied to all techniques.

Finally, I'd like to say in my own experience, I've always enjoyed performing with other guitarists. Most people reading this book will know other classical guitarists. Read music with them, play duets, trios, quartets. Make it into a party. I remember when I was in school, I used to get together with friends to work on technique. We'd spend hours working on the same exercises to the metronome. We'd call our get-togethers "scale parties" or "slur parties"—whatever we wanted to work on. We had a great time doing some of the driest technical work you can imagine. Trying new ideas and sharing ideas with others not only enhances our playing, but enhances our life.

Is that not what music should be about? §§

See Kevin's biography under the essay entitled, "Developing Self-Expression" in Chapter 5.

